



## **FSA and Other New Deal Documentaries**

The Resettlement Administration funded two documentary films, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* about the creation of the Dust Bowl and *The River* about the importance of Mississippi River. Both films, written and directed by Pare Lorentz, showed work of the FSA and other agencies in regard to conservation, the effects of soil erosion, deforestation and flooding.

### *The Plow that Broke the Plains (1936)*

This documentary film shows what happened to the plains when uncontrolled agricultural farming led to the Dust Bowl. It was written and directed by Pare Lorentz. Lorentz worked on the film with composer Virgil Thomson, who shared Lorentz' enthusiasm for folk music and incorporated many folk melodies and popular and religious music into the soundtrack. The film was sponsored by the Resettlement Administration to raise awareness about the New Deal. The film details the ecological causes for the natural disasters befalling farmers. It illustrates in an up-close and personal fashion the devastating effect those disasters had on farmers and their families. Lorentz concluded his film on an upbeat note, showing the efforts made by the Resettlement Administration to improve conditions for the farmers and to institute environmental reforms to prevent another Dust Bowl. *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

### *The River (1938)*

This short documentary, written and directed by Pare Lorentz film shows the importance of the Mississippi River. It details the history of the flood prone Mississippi basin and how farming and timber practices had caused topsoil to be swept down the river and into the Gulf of Mexico. The film was sponsored by the Resettlement Administration, which later became the Farm Security Administration in 1937. The film covers the efforts to control floods and conserve soil. Some of the scenes in the film have become clips in subsequent film and documentaries. The visual beauty of Lorentz's images is complemented by his free verse narration. *The River* was also selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Other Federal agencies beside the FSA made documentaries during the New Deal. The Civilian Conservation Corps had its own production company which made more than 30 films depicting the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the nation's forests, parks and farms. It worked with the Soil Conservation Service to produce a full-length film entitled *The Heritage We Guard* about the dangers of soil erosion. The Office of War Information produced newsreels and films. It also produced radio series and cleared commercial network radio scripts. It produced a series of 267 newsreels in 16mm film, called the United Newsreel. The Bureau of Overseas Motion Pictures of the Office of War Information made 26 documentaries, including *Toscanini*, *Autobiography of a Jeep* and *Cowboy*, in the Projections of America series. *The Town*, directed and cut by Josef von Sternberg, is about Madison, Indiana. It tells the story of how the town was dealing with the war and was becoming a melting pot. Other documentaries made by federal agencies during the Great Depression are listed below. *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, *The River* and the documentaries listed below are available in various places, including YouTube and the *Internet Archive*. They are also available in libraries or can be purchased. Teachers can also get many of them from the Pare Lorentz Film Center at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

*The Road Is Open Again (1933)*

Produced by Warner Brothers Studio for the National Recovery Administration, this five minute musical short stars Dick Powell as a songwriter who falls asleep on the job and is visited in a dream by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. After they voice their opinions about the New Deal in song, Powell awakes with a new outlook on life.

*The New Frontier (1934)*

This eleven-minute film done by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration shows a view of an experimental rural community.

*Hands (1934)*

This five minute silent film, directed by Ralph Steiner, is a portrait of one mankind's most essential tool, hands. It was produced by the Works Progress Administration.

*Better Housing News Flash # 7: Housing Act Peps Building (1935)*

This five minute film produced by the Federal Housing Administration discusses the benefits of the National Housing Act for homebuilders and homeowners.

*Better Housing News Flash # 9: Low Price Homes (1936)*

This six minute film produced by the Federal Housing Administration discusses how the average American can own a home.

*Work Pays America (1936)*

This is a 36 minute overview of the public projects of Works Progress Administration, including the building of 650,000 miles of roads, 78,000 bridges, 125,000 buildings, 700 miles of airport runways and the creation of 475,000 works of art and 225,000 concerts for audiences totaling 150 million.

*Dawn Strikes the Capitol Dome (1936)*

This ten minute film was produced by the Works Progress Administration. It is an impressionistic study of Washington, D. C.

*Man Against the River (1937)*

This Works Progress Administration film documents the flood in Ohio, Kentucky and Arkansas when the Ohio River overflowed its banks. The Works Progress Administration provided disaster relief.

*Rain for the Earth (1937)*

This ten minute film by the Works Progress Administration chronicles the devastating effects of the dust bowls in the plains.

*We Work Again (1937)*

This sixteen minute film was an effort to document the federal government's efforts to ensure African-Americans benefited from New Deal programs. It was produced by the Works Progress Administration.

*Shock Troops of Disaster (1938)*

This four and a half minute film by the Works Progress Administration shows the Works Progress Administration response to the New England hurricane of 1938.

*Power and the Land (1940)*

This 33 minute film, directed by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, was produced by the United States Film Service. The film portrays the changes experienced by an Ohio farm community after the Rural Electrification Administration brought electricity to the region. The poet Stephen Vincent Benet narrated.

*The Land (1942)*

Filmmaker Robert Flaherty wrote, directed and narrated this film while working for the U. S. Film Service. Together with his wife Frances, he traveled 100,000 miles and shot 25,000 feet of 35 mm film. Despite the lack of a plot, the film captured poverty in the devastated farmlands of the Midwest and the South. The goal was to detail the New Deal efforts to help farmers but the camera caught a different story. Unfortunately, the project was derailed while the Flahertys were still filming. Congress ended the U. S. Film Service and the footage was handed over to the

Department of Agriculture. The footage was ultimately edited into a 42-minute film. It premiered in February 1942 at the Museum of Modern Art, but its general release was denied.

*Valley of the Tennessee (1944)*

Alexander Hammid's film, produced for the Office of War Information, documents the origins of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the impact its creation had on residents of the Tennessee River Valley in Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi and other Southern states.

*The Columbia (1949)*

In May of 1941, Woody Guthrie was unemployed with a family to support, when an offer came from the Department of Energy, Bonneville Power Administration to narrate a documentary about the Bonneville Power Administration. By the time he arrived in Portland, the film project was discontinued, but the Bonneville Power Administration gave him a contract as a temporary laborer to write songs about rural electrification, irrigation and the Columbia River dams. A documentary called *Roll on Columbia: Woody Guthrie and the Bonneville Power Administration* recount the entire tale.